

Message Text

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PAGE 01 MOSCOW 00154 061610Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 0154

EXDIS

E.O. 11652 GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, EG, UR, US

SUBJECT: RUMORS OF LEADERSHIP DISAGREEMENTS FUELED BY BREZHNEV
ILLNESS

REF: CAIRO 0088

1. U.S. NEWSMAN RELATED ON JANAUARY 3 THAT A "SEMI-OFFICIAL" SOVIET SOURCE RECENTLY SAID THAT THERE WAS A GENERAL AIR OF UNEASE IN HIGH LEADERSHIP CIRCLES COMPARABLE TO THAT OF 1968. WE HAVE HAD SIMILAR RUMORS FROM OTHER NEWSMEN AND DIPLOMATS. MAIN SOURCES OF ALLEGED LEADERSHIP DISAGREEMENTS ARE THE MIDDLE EAST SITUATION, MORE SPECIFICALLY THE SUPPOSED SOVIET SETBACK WITH THE EGYPTIANS, AND DISSATISFACTION OVER THE FINAL FORM OF THE U.S. TRADE BILL AND THE COMPROMISE ON EMIGRATION. ALLEGEDLY SUCH DISSATISFACTION WAS VOICED AT RECENT CP PLENUM, WITH LOCAL PARTY OFFICIALS COMPLAINING ABOUT PROBLEMS WHICH EMIGRATION POSES FOR THEM IN TERMS OF MAINTAINING LOCAL CONTROLS.

2. THIS PLETHORA OF SPECULATION HAS BEEN FUELED BY REPORTS OF BREZHNEV'S ILLNESS ALONG LINES OF CAIRO 0088. OF POSSIBLE INTEREST THIS REGARD IS FACT THAT MOSCOW IS NOW SUFFERING A WAVE OF INFLUENZA, WITH ONE SOURCE STATING THAT SOME 400,000 MOSCOVITES WERE ILL WITH THE FLU, A FIGURE EASY TO BELIEVE. (WE CONTINUE TO FEEL, HOWEVER, THAT SOVIET-EGYPTIAN DIFFERENCES, RATHER THAN BREZHNEV'S POSSIBLE ILLNESS, ARE THE PRIMARY REASONS FOR POST-PONEMENT OF HIS VISIT.)

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3. THE ONLY SPECIFIC ITEM ON BREZHNEV'S ACTIVITIES TO APPEAR

SINCE HIS DECEMBER 24 ATTENDANCE AT THE RSFSR SUPREME SOVIET WAS A STATEMENT IN V.V. SHCHERBITSKIY'S SPEECH AT KRIVOY ROG ON DECEMBER 30. SHCHERBITSKIY SAID THAT BREZHNEV HAD CALLED THE KRIVOYROZHSTAL' PLANT JUST BEFORE THE MEETING AND CONGRATULATED ALL FOR COMPLETING A NEW BLAST FURNACE.

4. WHILE SOME OF THE RUMORS HAVE CERTAIN PLAUSIBILITY, WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO VERIFY ANY OF THEM AND, THEREFORE, REMAIN SKEPTICAL. IN ANY CASE, THERE HAS CERTAINLY BEEN NO DOWNGRADING OF BREZHNEV OF HINT OF LEADERSHIP STRUGGLE YET IN SOVIET PRESS, WHICH HAS BEEN FEATURING LETTERS FROM BREZHNEV TO SOVIET WORKERS AND FOREIGN FIGURES, A STANDARD TACTIC NOW USED TO KEEP HIS NAME BEFORE THE PUBLIC. IN ADDITION, USUAL LEADERSHIP FORMULATION OF "POLITBURO HEADED BY BREZHNEV" APPEARED IN JANUARY 4 PARTY APPEAL FOR SOCIALIST COMPETITION AND IN FOLLOW-UP PRAVDA LEAD ARTICLE JANUARY 5. TOTAL NUMBER OF CITATIONS OF BREZHNEV IN PRAVDA EDITORIALS DURING DECEMBER JUMPED TO RECORD HIGH OF 47, ALMOST TWICE THE NUMBER RECORDED IN THE POST-SUMMIT MONTH OF JULY. STOESSEL

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